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Did CIA Cover Up Murder? Author Disputes Kennedy Report

By Carol Cloe

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FORT LAUDERDALE — To Gaeton Fonzi, it was the biggest story of his career — an American president shot dead and almost 20 years later the murder still is a mystery.

"So, whatever happened to Lee Harvey Oswald?" a kid from Kansas was asking him. It was one of those early morning radio talk shows and Fonzi, used to working in dark quiet corners as an investigative reporter, was uncomfortable.

The question threw him. But the talk-show host recouped: "Oswald was slain by Jack Ruby," he said. On national television, he might have added.

Fonzi knew that was a long time ago, long before Warren Commission critics dispelled the tidy theory that a bullet from the Dallas drifter's rifle killed President John F. Kennedy. The CIA had not yet engineered the assassination of a Latin American president. An American president was yet to resign under pressure.



Gaeton Fonzi

Still, Fonzi can't believe the 14-year-old Kansas youth and a generation of other Americans can be so ignorant. That so many people old enough to remember don't care enrages him.

"Don't they realize this was done to them?" he asked in a rare emotional outburst. "Most people take an interest in the democratic process when the price of gas goes up. If the government's manipulation is smooth enough, they figure it's not bothering them."

The CIA and other government agencies have lied about their roles in the Kennedy assassination since 1963 — in many cases deliberately spreading false stories to mislead the public, Fonzi said.

The congressional committees formed to investigate the assassination were limited by short-sighted political maneuverings and were not equipped to solve the mystery, he said.

Fonzi was a staff member on the last two committees, an experience he said he hopes never to repeat.

"The government's whole program since 1963 was designed to bore people, to confuse them, to make them lose interest," Fonzi said. He fears the plan may be working.

Fonzi detailed his experiences as a staff member for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and its successor, the House Assassinations Committee in a book-length, two-part series in Gold Coast and the Washingtonian magazines in November and December. He also wrote of the evidence he uncovered from operatives in the anti-Castro underground in Miami, where he has lived for eight years.

"I had to get it out of my system," Fonzi said of his decision to break his five-year oath of silence.

His prose is lined with tension and becomes more vehement as he describes the waning months of the House committee's work.

In person, however, Fonzi is a soft-spoken man, who answers questions guardedly.

"Obsession" is too strong a word to describe his preoccupation with Kennedy's death, he said. "I am constantly interested in the issue. I did hit my head against the wall a few times. But I am a journalist and I approached it as any journalist would a big story."

Yet, he admits that when it became evident in 1979 that the House committee's report would not contain large chunks of the evidence he uncovered, "I wanted to go back to Florida and leave the country."

His struggle to learn the truth about the Kennedy assassination is a strange crusade for Fonzi. He said he didn't vote for Kennedy in 1960 and didn't respect him as president.

Fonzi was 28 when Kennedy was shot. He was working as an investigative reporter and writer for Philadelphia magazine.

Like most Americans, he tended to accept the 1964 Warren Commission report that named Oswald as the lone assassin.

One year later a lawyer named Vincent Salandria found contradictions in the evidence uncovered and the conclusions reached in the report. Fonzi believed the man was crazy — until he interviewed him for Philadelphia magazine.

"It was complex and technical, but I did grasp the sensational implication of Salandria's contentions: There was a possibility the Warren Commission report was wrong," Fonzi said.

The interview shattered his preconceived notions, Fonzi said.

In the 10 years following his talk with Salandria, he wrote a book about publishing czar Walter Annenberg, won some journalism awards and became a partner in 1972 in Florida Magazine Publishers Inc., which publishes Gold Coast and five other magazines in the state.

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